

# **Appendix K: Summary and Response to Public Comments**



# Summary and Response to Public Comments

## General Comments and Questions

We received a tremendous number of comments on the Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan. In this document, the comments and our responses are summarized. A complete list of questions and responses is available online at <http://midwest.fws.gov/planning/necedah/index.html>.

Several people wrote letters supporting Alternative 3, the preferred alternative. Their comments included the following:

- We support Alternative 3 because it provides the most ecological and economic benefits to the region; it is a balanced approach to resource management.
- I support Alternative 3 because it is clear that this is the environmentally-appropriate planning direction for the Refuge.
- I support Alternative 3 because National Wildlife Refuge belongs to everybody and the measures outlined in this alternative will improve habitat and biological diversity.
- I support Alternative 3 because it will provide a high quality of life for all.
- I support Alternative 3 because it expands conservation efforts on private land which Aldo Leopold deemed necessary more than 50 years ago.
- I support Alternative 3 because it correctly identifies the importance of private landowners, maintains a strong emphasis on retaining land in private ownership, and includes working with private landowners as a priority.
- I support Alternative 3 because the Refuge should be able to continue and grow in its achievements.
- We support Alternative 3 for this extremely valuable and biologically-rich region. The people of Wisconsin and the entire United States place a high value on these ecologically critical lands. Only through adoption of Alternative 3 can a full range of positive actions be taken to benefit these lands and waters to the greatest extent possible.
- I support Alternative 3 because it is the only option that suits the needs of the Refuge, the natural community, and the strong conservation goals of both the state and the Necedah area.
- We support Alternative 3 as it best addresses needs of wildlife while including the well-being of landowners surrounding the Refuge.
- I own property next to the Refuge and support Alternative 3, as I would like to see the Refuge increase both habitat and production of waterfowl.
- We support Alternative 3 because it not only addresses the concerns and environment for today, but also looks to the long-term benefits for our natural resources and provides conservation opportunities for private landowners.
- I support Alternative 3 because the Refuge is a rare jewel and deserves protection.
- I support Alternative 3 because the more wildlife areas we have, the better.
- I support Alternative 3 because it represents the best choice for responsible stewards of our Nation's natural resources to pursue.
- My wife and I have been very pleased that the Fish and Wildlife Service is working with us to provide wildflower vegetation on our farmland. This fits with our goal to be good stewards on our farmland. What a great opportunity for us, and now the FWS is able to expand its effectiveness well beyond the boundaries of the Necedah NWR. Win-Win. I am also pleased

to see that you will be expanding services to visitors at the refuge. Thanks for all of your efforts. Our grandchildren will thank you as well!

Some comments suggested that the planning process had been inadequate and that the Service should start over. One writer suggested that instead of preparing a CCP, the Service set up a panel of local people to find ways to prevent the degradation of sensitive land without purchasing land. Acquiring land is just one element of the Refuge's proposal to conserve land in the Yellow River Area; the Refuge is very interested in assisting private landowners with projects on their property. The Refuge is mandated by Congress to prepare a CCP, and this process has included many opportunities for people to voice their ideas on how sensitive land can be conserved.

Another writer suggested that the Service "return to the drawing board" and improve its research tactics, cross-reference statistics, "really involve the public," work more closely with non-profits, and "...prepare a plan that demonstrates a real working knowledge of the culture, people, economy and habitat of the Juneau and Wood County areas."

The Refuge began work on this comprehensive conservation plan in 1997. Many people from Wood and Juneau counties have contributed their time to reviewing the document. We feel that it would be irresponsible to abandon this effort. Our efforts to involve people have included scoping meetings at the beginning of the planning process, project updates, open houses, public meetings, informational meetings, one-on-one meetings, and news releases to local newspapers, television stations and radio stations.

Most of the criticism this comprehensive conservation has drawn has focused on the proposal to expand the Refuge into the Yellow River Focus Area. The comprehensive conservation plan outlines direction for Refuge management for the next 15 years. While some comments have opposed expanding the Refuge, we do not believe that comments about the course we are setting for wildlife and habitat warrant throwing out a document that incorporates comments received from a broad range of people over the course of several years.

Another writer criticized the draft CCP for failing to clarify whether the 150,000 visitors cited in the document includes all activities, Refuge staff and researchers, students, and WCC crews. The writer also states that the draft CCP does not state which activities the figure applies to. The figure refers to all public visits for consumptive (hunting and fishing, for example) and non-consumptive uses (bird watching and hiking, for example). It does not include Refuge staff, volunteers, or WCC crews. This point was clarified in the final CCP.

Data included in the draft CCP was criticized by some reviewers. One individual said that budget information conflicted, noting that number of parking spaces described for a proposed visitor center would barely cover staff parking needs. The writer describes the costs for the proposed visitor center as exorbitant and unsupported. Refuge staff would continue to park private vehicles at the Headquarters building, which has ample parking for staff and Refuge vehicles. Costs for the maintenance shop were less than what had been outlined in the draft plan, in part because a smaller building was built than originally planned. The Service is required to meet a variety of mandates, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, which can make buildings more expensive. Some reviewers described discrepancies between acreages provided both in figures and text. We have attempted to present acreages more clearly in the final CCP.

Another writer questions how the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States may impact future Refuge budgets. Refuge funding depends on congressional appropriations, and we can never be certain of what funding will occur in the future. As a long-term guide to Refuge management, the CCP has to make some assumptions about funding, however. The funding we describe are based on our experience with the budget process. It is important to note that CCPs are intended to guide

management of a refuge, but they do not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operational maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.

A reviewer said that the Planning Team used dated numbers for in reporting cord wood harvested from the Refuge. The length of time involved in preparing the Necedah NWR CCP has made some numbers out of date before the plan was completed. Because timber harvest is done to restore and manage wildlife habitat, not for economic reasons, we have not updated this figure.

Some reviewers said that the management alternatives did not address the Refuge's status in terms of complying with statutory mandates. Complying with the law was assumed in all three alternatives considered.

The Refuge's compliance with the 1979 Archaeological Resources Act was noted by one reviewer. The writer questioned why a schedule for step-down plans addressing this issue was not identified in the draft CCP. The revised draft CCP included language addressing this (Objective 5.3.4: "By 2017, in accordance with the Archaeological Resource Preservation Act, protect 100 percent of the known archaeological and cultural resources on the Refuge." Strategies under that objective relate to developing a step-down plan to fulfill requirements of the Archaeological and Cultural Preservation Act.

One person said that the Service provided too little time for review of the draft CCP. Two alternatives were based on another document, the 1979 Master Plan, and review of that document was critical to understanding the CCP, the reviewer said. The original 30-day public review period was expanded by 60 days, which we felt was adequate time to review additional documents. Summary information from the 1979 Master Plan was provided in the draft CCP, which was intended to reduce the need to review the Master Plan.

One reviewer asked for additional information on mitigation of smoke issues and the budget for prescribed burns. The reviewer noted that the budget for prescribed fires had increased, and yet the Refuge would perform the burns with staff. First, smoke mitigation includes but is not limited to transport wind direction, atmospheric conditions, temperature, humidity, fuel moisture, time of day and other factors that relate to how much smoke is created and which direction it moves. Essentially, we try to perform prescribed burns when conditions offer the least potential for heavy smoke. Secondly, federal burning requirements have changed over the years in response to concerns about safety. It takes roughly twice the number of people to conduct a burn, and the Refuge hires burn specialists from other federal agencies to assist at Necedah NWR. These individuals are paid by the Refuge or by their employing agency under a cooperative agreement contract. The federal government has very specific training and physical testing procedures, and for that reason we are not able to call in local fire department personnel. However, individuals who have the minimum requirements can be hired to help conduct prescribed burns. In addition to personnel costs, we also have equipment needs. The Refuge's newest piece of equipment is a 1992 pickup with a 200-gallon water tank. Most of the equipment is of 1960s vintage. Seventy percent of the equipment is military surplus because that is all the Refuge has been able to afford.

Another reviewer questioned how satisfied private landowners have been with the Service's technical assistance. We have not conducted scientific surveys of landowners. Anecdotally, personal contacts indicate that landowners are satisfied with the assistance they receive.

## **Land Acquisition Comments and Questions**

Many questions related to the impacts of land acquisition by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. For instance, one writer asked if drainage on his or her property would change as a result of wetland

restoration. Service staff work with adjacent landowners and drainage districts to ensure that existing drainage facilities or patterns are not negatively impacted by Refuge activities. Like all landowners, the Service is legally prohibited from creating changes in drainage that would negatively impact another landowner.

An individual questioned whether the Drainage District would retain right of access if the Refuge acquired property with an active drainage district for maintenance of drainage ditches, tile and outlets. Like any landowner, the Service is subject to any outstanding rights (easements) on any of the land it acquires.

A reviewer questioned what kind of uses would be deemed compatible on new Refuge lands if they were acquired in the Yellow River Focus Area. It is difficult to anticipate what wildlife-dependent activities would be available without knowing how much land the Service might acquire in the area or when land might be acquired. In general, priority wildlife-dependent activities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and wildlife photography, environmental education and environmental interpretation would be considered as the Service acquired enough land to support those activities.

An individual who was considering buying land in the Yellow River Focus Area questioned whether the Service's possible acquisition of land would impact his or her use of the land, such as building a house or one day selling the land. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service cannot have any effect on what you do with your land, so there would be no implications for building a home or selling the land. Your use of your land would be the same with or without the Service as a neighbor.

Another reviewer asked how the Service's ownership of land would affect the local real property tax situation. Because the Service is a federal agency, lands it owns are removed from the tax rolls. However, under provisions of the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act, the county or other local unit of government receives an annual revenue sharing payment to help off-set the loss of taxes. It is difficult to predict how land acquisition within the Yellow River Focus Area would affect property taxes because the Service would be buying from willing sellers only and we cannot predict where land might become available.

## **Public Involvement Comments and Questions**

The Refuge received one comment asking for information on how the Service involved the public in the development of the Necedah NWR CCP. Public participation is a vital part of refuge planning and the Service has worked hard to ensure inclusive public participation in this proposal (see Chapter 6, Table 17). Federal, state, local, and private entities were involved in the CCP/EA development process. These include Wisconsin's Congressional Delegations, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Interior, Federal legislative members representing the counties involved, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, representatives from county, township, and other local governments, representatives of national, state, and local conservation organizations, landowners, and other interested groups and citizens. Information about the project was provided to stakeholders and the general public through news releases, presentations, interviews, informational letters, public meetings, briefings, and the Internet. Questionnaires, focus groups, and one-on-one discussions were used to gather input. The Service hosted public scoping meetings at the Refuge and the Necedah Town Hall to exchange information on the refuge proposal. Informational meetings continued over the next 3 years at the request of the general public, government agencies, conservation organizations, and Congressional staff.

One individual said that "statements contained in the CCP vastly over-state the involvement of units of government and the general public in the preparation of the CCP." The individual expressed the belief that affected landowners in the Refuge area had little contact from Refuge staff during the planning process, that input by people opposed to Refuge projects or expansion was severely limited,

and that a breakdown in mediation between the Refuge and landowners indicated that “the refuge does not adhere to policy #96-09.” The number of open houses, public meetings, presentations to groups, and project updates suggests that Refuge staff made every effort to involve the public in this planning process. Two draft CCPs were issued and we asked for comments on both documents and made revisions to the document based on those comments. We did not agree with every comment and did not base every decision on those comments, however. It is important to distinguish between involving and informing the public and reaching total consensus with everyone on every issue discussed in the CCP.

An individual submitted a comment criticizing the Refuge’s partnering and communication with state and local agencies. Specifically, the individual suggested that the Refuge was not working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and FSA, legislators, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and local drainage ditches, specifically the Little Yellow River Drainage District. Another writer suggested that the Refuge had not sufficiently involved key players and deliberately ignored others.

The planning process afforded numerous opportunities to participate, and no one was ever “intentionally ignored” in this planning process. Partnerships are a way of doing business and the Refuge has worked hard over the years to identify and perpetuate partnerships that enhance the Service and Refuge mission. The Refuge has many active partnerships. The Refuge works with the local drainage board on issues of drainage on and off the Refuge. We have not worked with the Little Yellow River Drainage District because neither the Refuge nor any private lands north of the Refuge are in the drainage District. Refuge staff have working relationships with the Natural Resource Conservation Service on issues of wetland determination, wetland restoration, swamp buster mitigation restorations, and more recently the Wetland Reserve Program since implementation of the 1985 Farm Bill began in 1987. Up to this point, only one Juneau County property has been accepted into the Wetland Reserve Program, but several properties have been evaluated. While not required by the Federal Farm Bill, local agencies, such as Farm Service Agency and the Wisconsin DNR, are frequently consulted in the evaluation process, though not in every case. An example of Refuge partnership is one involving our Partners for Wildlife Private Lands Program and the Hurley property in Juneau County near Lyndon Station. Several wetlands were restored on this tribal property through partnership efforts with Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Wisconsin DNR, with financial contributors being the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association, a local heavy equipment contractor, and the Ho-Chunk Nation. At a recognition event held on August 31, 2001, State Senator Shultz, who was a keynote speaker at the event, praised the partnership. The Refuge works closely with members of the Ho-Chunk Nation on issues of archaeological and cultural resource protection.

## **Wildlife Comments and Questions**

In addition to questions about the CCP and criticism of the document, the Service also received several comments supporting the selection of Alternative 3 as the preferred alternative. Comments included:

- I support Alternative 3 because the Refuge is one of the few remaining places people can observe wildlife in a natural state.
- I support Alternative 3 because it allows the Refuge to continue conserving red-shouldered hawks and whooping cranes.
- I support Alternative 3 because it allows the Refuge to conserve threatened and endangered species while protecting thousands of acres of habitat.
- I support Alternative 3 because it is biologically sound and will result in positive gains for the wildlife resources found there, especially the eastern massasaugas.

- I support Alternative 3 because southern Wisconsin is rapidly losing habitat for wildlife and we need to protect what habitat we can in central Wisconsin.
- Numerous people commented on the Refuges whooping crane project and its success. The whooping crane project is a fantastic project which spans our beautiful country. Keep up the good work, you get an “A” on your report from this taxpayer.
- I support Alternative 3 because it is the most favorable for wildlife and provides for new ways to work creatively with adjacent landowners.
- I support Alternative 3 because the whooping crane is still very much endangered and this alternative outlines measures to recover this species.
- I support Alternative 3 because it offers local communities the greatest benefit while it creates a very reasonable land management plan, which will protect endemic and treasured species.
- I support Alternative 3, as it is essential to protect and conserve the gray wolf, whooping crane, bald eagle, and migratory birds that are holding on to survival in this rich ecosystem.
- I support Alternative 3 because it will provide immeasurable benefits for our nation’s wildlife.
- I support Alternative 3 of the draft CCP as it favors endangered and threatened species as well as recovers hundreds of thousands of acres of wild lands.
- I support Alternative 3 because it will benefit wildlife and allow the environment to recover from human abuse.
- We support Alternative 3 because it allows for protection of endangered and threatened species, proper management of waterfowl and other migratory birds, and management of biological diversity while allowing public enjoyment of the property.

In other comments, an individual urged the Refuge to evaluate the effects of roadways within the Refuge, particularly road kills occurring State Highway 80. The Refuge has gated several roads that it maintains and in the CCP reaffirms its commitment to keeping those roads closed. However, township and state roads will remain open to the public as the Refuge has no jurisdiction over them. Per Refuge-specific regulations, the speed limit is 35 miles per hour within the Refuge.

One reviewer questioned why the CCP included an objective to thin some pine plantations even though another objective is to increase the breeding population of Goshawks. The Refuge has documented one Goshawk nest, and this nest occurred in a pine plantation. The Refuge has proposed to conduct “Minimal” management activities on nearly 10,000 acres, and several pine plantations occur within these areas that could benefit Goshawks. Thinnings are proposed on the remaining pine plantations to mimic the natural thinning that is already occurring. All pine plantations will be surveyed for active Goshawk nests prior to thinning.

Several stakeholders recommended strengthening the Refuge’s pest management strategy, saying that the Refuge should strive to reduce or eliminate pest species rather than reducing these species to current (2002) levels. Reviewers said that the Refuge should use pesticides only as a last resort. The Refuge seeks to maintain pest species at 2002 levels because pest species are currently at manageable levels. In general, the Refuge uses pesticides for only one species, spotted knapweed. In 2001, pesticides were used to eliminate a small (<one-quarter acre) patch of leafy spurge that was discovered on the Refuge.

The Refuge was urged to increase the buffer zones around wolf dens designed to protect this species. In an effort to protect wolf dens, we have incorporated wolf management guidelines used by the Wisconsin DNR.



Some reviewers questioned whether expansion of the Hardwood Bombing Range could have negative connotations on Refuge wildlife and whether expansion would occur. In the CCP, the Refuge stated that increased military aircraft activity could negatively affect staging waterfowl and nesting Bald Eagles. This has been documented in scientific literature (see Gladwin, D. A., D. A. Asherin, and K. M. Mancini. 1987. Effects of aircraft noise and sonic boom on fish and wildlife: results of survey of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service endangered species and ecological services field offices, refuges, hatcheries, and research centers. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Ecol. Res. Cent. NERC-88/30). Regarding the likelihood of expansion to aircraft activity, in February 2002 the Secretary of the Air Force signed a Record of Decision authorizing the expansion of the Hardwood Bombing Range by over 7,000 acres.

One writer noted that "...conservation of rare and threatened resources should be among the highest priorities for Necedah NWR. The highest priority should be placed on securing high quality natural areas through appropriate management, work with private landowners or when that is not possible fee title acquisition." In recent years the Refuge has placed more emphasis on conservation of listed species and their habitats. The Refuge's savanna restoration efforts are one good example. Work in the Yellow River Area would benefit the Karner blue butterfly and eastern Massassauga.

An individual asked for a description of the Service's policy regarding crop damage resulting from increases in wildlife populations and asked whether the Service intends to make wildlife food plots part of its management plan. Service policy is to use tools such as hunting, lure crops, and habitat manipulation to assure that wildlife, particularly local Canada Geese, do not cause depredation problems on neighboring farmland. While the development of wildlife food plots is not a primary objective of this Refuge, it does remain an option, depending on the site, type of wildlife, and type of food plot. Service policy is to use the most natural means available to meet wildlife objectives. The Service currently uses water-level management on Refuge pools to produce moist soil food for waterfowl and wading birds. This is a more efficient natural food source than food plot row crops and is available for a longer period of time. It also does not add fertilizers and pesticides into the environment. If a localized depredation problem were to arise, the Service, working in concert with the USDA Animal Damage Control Division, would be available to assist in developing a damage abatement program specific to the problem.

Several stakeholders wanted the Refuge to manage ecosystems and ecosystem processes, such as fire, to conserve a wide suite of species rather than focusing on single-species management. Stakeholders saw species protection as the primary goal for managing ecosystems, however, they understood the efficiency of an "umbrella" approach that benefits many species with a single management strategy. The "Ecosystem Approach" is a new standard for the National Wildlife Refuge System. While we have mimicked ecosystem processes by using management tools such as fire and timber harvest for many years, we are now using them in more informed and focused ways. We will continue to refine this approach over the next 15 years by incorporating results from research and monitoring into Refuge management decisions.

One comment stated that the general public was unhappy to learn about the Refuge's eastern massassauga rattlesnake study after snakes had already been placed on the Refuge. The writer perceived a conflict between a CCP statement that the Refuge will not be conducting any Massassauga-related activities on the Refuge proper and references to the methodology that is to be incorporated for reintroduction (See Handbook for Land Managers: 2000; "eliminate all take of eastern Massassauga rattlesnake," p.68). The CCP does not state that any methodology will be used for reintroducing eastern Massassauga rattlesnakes, on the Refuge or within the Yellow River area. The CCP states: "Should the eastern Massassauga rattlesnake occur on the Refuge, the protective measures in 'The Eastern Massassauga Rattlesnake: A Handbook for Land Managers 2000' will be implemented", and "Continue to assist landowners in the Yellow River area, Monroe County, LaCrosse, and Buffalo County with Eastern Massassauga Rattlesnake management support and surveys, in accordance with 'The Eastern Massassauga Rattlesnake: A Handbook for Land Managers'". The handbook referred to here would be used should eastern massassauga rattlesnakes

re-colonize the Refuge from the Yellow River, where a wild population currently exists. As a candidate species for federal listing, managing eastern massasauga, if they occur on federal property, is part of the Service's mission and is mandated by federal law. There are no plans to re-introduce massasauga rattlesnakes on the Refuge or in the Yellow River Area, or to restrict private land use due the presence of massasauga snakes.

A reviewer perceived the CCP as including little active management of mammals on the refuge and said the only management of invertebrates deals with the Karner blue butterfly. Very little active management of mammals occurs on the Refuge. Managing habitat has proven to be the most effective way of managing wildlife, and thus most of the focus is placed on management of habitats, not indigenous species. However, certain game species and small mammals are regulated through hunting and trapping programs.

One comment stated that the CCP fails to address or outline wildlife management problems currently faced on the Refuge. The individual said that a great deal of on-Refuge work is incomplete and there appears to be intentional disregard for several statutory mandates. In the CCP, see Chapter 2 "Planning Process" and the appended Environmental Assessment, Chapter 1, "Purpose and Need for Action." In these sections we discussed the relevant issues currently facing the Refuge, especially in the areas of Service trust resources, habitat, public use, and the Yellow River Focus Area. If there are problems we may have overlooked, then we hope you will bring those to our attention at your earliest convenience. There has been no intentional or unintentional disregard for any statutory mandate.

One writer stated that massasaugas became abundant in the Yellow River only after intensive logging efforts were begun and, therefore, the decline of this species in the Yellow River was due to changes in logging practices. Extensive logging creates ideal habitat for eastern massasaugas as food sources and protection from avian predators become abundant. However, there are many natural disturbances that also contribute to creating and/or maintaining massasauga habitat including herbivory, wildfires, insect outbreaks, disease outbreaks, extreme flooding events, etc. As these disturbances have always been part of the Yellow River landscape (controlled only recently by humans) we can assume that eastern massasaugas have always been part of that landscape as well.

A writer stated that expanded turkey populations will result in high predation rates of eastern massasaugas, thereby thwarting potential recovery efforts. Turkeys will opportunistically kill snakes. This does not preclude eastern massasauga recovery but emphasizes the importance of including woody plant cover in the massasaugas habitat to prevent predation from avian and land-based predators.

A writer stated that woodpecker populations have not changed in the Yellow River and suggested that Refuge personnel may have missed them. A wealth of data demonstrates that some species, including the Red-headed Woodpecker and Cerulean and Prothonotary Warblers, have seen dramatic population declines across North America. The Refuge assumes that given their low abundance in the Yellow River area today, these rare species have declined there as well.

## **Habitat Comments and Questions**

Several stakeholders commented that they support Alternative 3 because it provides ecological and economic benefits. Comments supporting Alternative 3 noted modifications that reviewers would like made to the alternative, including 1) Eliminate any cap on fee-title acquisition of land in the Yellow River Focus Area, 2) adequately protect species such as Goshawks and Red-shouldered Hawks needing interior forests conditions, 3) begin study to address road-kill along Highway 80, 4) expand the size of reference areas, 5) increase the proportion of forest lands in old-growth conditions, and 6) identify roads for elimination to increase security habitat for sensitive species. Comments also included:

- The Refuge and other public properties form the largest wild land complex in the Upper Midwest. The presence of active wolf packs attests to the area's remote qualities. I support Alternative 3 because it provides the most ecological and economic benefits to this region.
- I support Alternative 3 because it outlines efforts to restore early succession habitats. Earlier disappearance of these habitats on the Refuge caused the loss of both prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse in the area.
- I support Alternative 3 because wetlands do not have adequate protection and entire ecosystems are threatened.
- I support Alternative 3 because it provides for landscape level management and conservation of critical habitat and other means of ensuring long-term commitment to protection for this important area.
- I support Alternative 3 because the Necedah Refuge deserves adequate protection.
- We support Alternative 3 because it allows the Refuge to move forward with plans such as savanna restoration, which will greatly improve the Refuge for future generations.
- I support Alternative 3 because the work the Refuge conducts is extremely important as loss of wildlife habitat in the Nation is continuous.
- I support Alternative 3 because wilderness habitat is priceless and wonderful and important for our future.

*A reviewer questioned* why are no floral or faunal surveys were conducted for timber harvest. The Refuge currently conducts pre-harvest vegetation, songbird, and Karner blue butterfly surveys on all of its savanna restorations. Thinning type timber harvest are assumed to not change species composition and are therefore not surveyed. Timber harvests designed to reduce fuel loads in high fire hazard areas are not surveyed as the sales are conducted for safety purposes which has a higher priority than species composition. The Refuge will be conducting precut songbird surveys in all the habitats being converted to open landscape per the CCP and forest management plan.

Some reviewers encouraged the Refuge to eliminate non-native cool season grasslands. The Refuge is taking a proactive approach to suppression or elimination of cool season grasslands. The CCP outlines open landscape and savanna restoration activities which will eliminate several thousand acres of cool season grasses. The Refuge's extensive prescribed burn program targets cool season grasses by burning in the spring after cool season grasses have emerged but the warm season grasses are still dormant.

Although several stakeholders commented that they support Alternative 3 because it provides ecological and economic benefits, they suggested modifications to the alternative: 1) Eliminate any cap on fee-title acquisition of land in the Yellow River Focus Area; 2) adequately protect species such as Goshawks and Red-shouldered Hawks needing interior forests conditions; 3) begin study to address road-kill along Highway 80; 4) expand the size of reference areas; 5) increase the proportion of forest lands in old-growth conditions; and 6) identify roads for elimination to increase security habitat for sensitive species. Regarding the suggestion that we eliminate any cap on fee-title acquisition in the Yellow River Focus Area, we believe that the most successful conservation efforts are those that have the support of the local community. While many people within the Yellow River Focus Area support the Refuge's work there, others have voiced concern about federal land acquisition and involvement in the area. We believe we could accomplish more for conservation without the cap in the short-term, but ultimately we would like to have a positive working relationship with landowners in the Yellow River area. At this time, a cap on land acquisition seems like a good start to building this relationship. Alternative 3 supports Goshawk and Red-shouldered Hawk protection, and we have identified a couple of roadway spurs on the Refuge that could be closed because they are not necessary for either

local access or emergency response vehicles. The suggestion that the Refuge begin a study to address road-kill along Highway 80 is a good one and we will make a note of it.

A writer encouraged the Refuge to increase the amount of “old growth” forests on the property. In the CCP, the Refuge committed to “minimal” management on 10,085 acres. Within these areas, old growth forests will continue to develop. Therefore, the Refuge went from 0 to 10,085 acres of area designated as “old growth areas” as a result of the CCP.

An individual stated that the Refuge has no reason to consider neighboring cranberry marshes a threat to the Refuge. The Refuge maintains that the cranberry industry uses a variety of pesticides that pose threats to wildlife and water quality. Although none of these pesticides have been shown to adversely impact water quality or wildlife on the Refuge, the vectors for contamination currently exist.

One writer took issue with a statement in the CCP concerning partnerships. “The CCP states that in the 12-county area, containing 400 basins and in ‘partnership’ with the Refuge, resulted in the protected status of only 1,824 acres since 1986, with apparently 25 restorations per year. That same page states that in 11 of 17 counties, 41 easements are now in place, conserving 2,475 acres with 418 acres currently under review. It is not clear – as no map of the acreages is provided – to show whether these acreages now under some conservation are one and the same. Furthermore, the document fails to explain how having one additional staff will achieve the goal of restoring 15 acres of wetland per year and 60 acres of grassland within the 12-county area, and 250 acres per year of easements and land acquisition towards the stated 2017 target goal of 3,750 acres, when their current capabilities with existing staff managed to accomplish only 25 restorations per year, and no clarification is provided as to the type of restoration accomplished.”

The comment refers to the Refuge’s Partner for Wildlife program. It should be noted that no mention is made on the pages in question regarding “protected status” as all lands restored through that program remain in private ownership. The 41 Conservation Easements totaling 2,475 acres refers to easements that were transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from the Farmers Home Administration. Those lands (which also remain in private ownership) are encumbered with perpetual easements. However, the 400 basins the writer referred to are wetland restorations on private land and are not under any long-term easement, but only a 10-year cost/share (handshake) agreement.

A writer stated that “Specific mention is made of cranberry bog acreage and expansion of cranberry bogs are stated as a threat. However, prices of cranberries have been at all time lows, with the federal government even providing subsidies in the last year. Thus, the 4 percent expansion per year figure used in the IEc model is highly unlikely, and, in fact, unfounded.” The projection used by Industrial Economics Inc. was made at a point in time (mid-1990s) when the industry was still expanding, and expectations were for a continuation of that growth. We are aware of the recent contraction in that industry.

A reviewer noted that a comprehensive inventory is needed as there may be rare species of plants that have not been identified. *The writer suggested that that work should be a priority for Refuge staff.* Part of what goes into the planning effort is weighing the risk to the resources the Service is mandated to conserve. Because wildlife species such as the Red-shouldered Hawk and the gray wolf (both which use the Yellow River Area) are area-dependent and sensitive to habitat fragmentation, and because working with private landowners takes more time than working on Service land, we felt that Service involvement with private landowners in the Yellow River was a high priority. Staff funding for Yellow River Focus Area technical assistance is a separate fund account and cannot be used for funding staff work on the Refuge proper.

An individual said that an emphasis on specific types of habitat management is absent in step down management plans, which the individual said emphasize bricks and mortar and land acquisition,

including a main office, visitor information system, and housing to accommodate overnight guests. Comprehensive conservation plans are designed to be strategic in nature. Step-down management plans are the planning mechanism the National Wildlife Refuge System uses to get at the details of day-to-day management. However, the Refuge CCP provides a much higher level of detail than most CCPs. Specific habitat management is not absent as the CCP addresses oak savanna restoration, water level management, sedge meadow management, and forest management.

One reviewer criticized the CCP for not containing sufficient information backing up references to air, noise, and water pollution, all things which are viewed as ongoing threats. The writer also noted that descriptions such as “large block” were not defined. Potential expansion of the Hardwood Bombing Range was one of the threats identified in the draft CCP. Since the writing of the draft CCP, that threat has been realized with the recent approval by the Secretary of the Air Force for an additional 7,000 acres to be added to that range. Threats to Refuge water quality (and associated aquatic habitats) from potential agricultural runoff remain. This includes former areas of forest land converted to pivot-irrigation agricultural land for potatoes, sweet corn, and sweet peas. This also includes land converted for cranberry bed establishment. Table 8 in the draft EA states that 510,395 acres of agricultural land are present in the Castle Rock Watershed, in which the Refuge is located. The CCP states that “many of the large natural areas around the Refuge....” Defining “large blocks” can be accomplished, although the definition is only pertinent to the type of habitat being defined and species likely to benefit. For instance, in Chapter 4 of the CCP, one of the grassland strategies states: “establish and maintain a mosaic of small (40 to 1,000 acres) and medium-sized (1,000 to 5,000 acres) native grasslands comprised of short, medium, and tall height-density patches containing diverse structure to provide nesting, brood-rearing, and foraging habitat for grassland birds...”

A reviewer expressed concern that bird and other wildlife populations may be carriers of oak wilt disease and that Refuge policies may endanger the health of oak stand timber stands on private lands. Red oak stands on private land are not at greater risk due to Refuge policies. The fungus is widespread in the state and increases in risk result from individual trees being weakened or damaged. The Refuge policy states that timber sales will not be conducted during times that would spread oak wilt. The opposite may occur as adjacent private landowners unknowingly trim or cut oak wilt-infested trees in April through June. This activity may result in its spread to the Refuge and neighboring properties.

An individual reviewing the Draft CCP was concerned about prescribed fire being used on the Refuge and the potential for fire to escape onto his land. In our policies governing the use of prescribed fire, the Service makes every effort to assure the safety of neighboring properties. The Refuge has conducted prescribed burns for more than 40 years. In that time, more than 100 prescribed burns have been conducted safely with none ever escaping to private property.

## **Economic Comments and Questions**

Comments in support of Alternative 3 included:

- I support Alternative 3 because the Refuge is an important part of Juneau County's tourist industry and deserves our support to continue to develop.
- I support Alternative 3 because it will benefit my business and is the reason I chose to locate my business in close proximity to the Refuge.
- I support Alternative 3 because it provides the most ecological and economic benefits to the region and beyond and provides a balanced approach to resource management on the Refuge and in the Yellow River Focus Area.

One reviewer said that timber harvest data used in the CCP is vague. “The only notation supplied is 40-400 acres per year / 2-4 sales per year. Given annual issuance of permits and contracts in this

regard, more specific data should be disclosed, and would lend some credibility on at least one issue related to economic impact.” The discussion of timber harvest is in reference to savanna restoration, not economic gains or losses associated with Refuge timber harvest activities. The Service prefaced the discussion of social and economic resources with the following statement: “Some of the data used to generate the economic report is associated with uncertainty. As a result, the estimates in the report should be interpreted with uncertainty in mind.” More detailed information is available to the public upon request, and is also available in our Forest Management Plan, a CCP step-down plan. The CCP is not designed to contain this level of detail. Additional data could easily be provided if it is a genuine concern. The Refuge has the number of sales, acreage figures, cruising tallies, and monetary bid information available.

A reviewer criticized the numbers used in evaluation of economic impact, specifically referencing the use of visitor use days as opposed to population figures for the Village of Necedah. The CCP states the “Village of Necedah and surrounding area” total about 3,000 permanent residents. There is no correlation between the number of permanent residents/seasonal occupants and the 106,000 visitors days used in the economic impact assessment.

An individual questioned why a staffing chart totaled 11.55 positions currently, but that an economic indicator of 18 positions is used to calculate contributions to the local economy. The reviewer questioned which number is correct. These are two different numbers. The chart refers to the 11.55 staff positions currently employed at the Refuge. The number in the Economic Impact Assessment refers the number of “jobs” generated by Refuge-related commercial and management economic activities (total 18). These are jobs in the community, not at the Refuge.

An individual stated that no assumptions were made as to the negative economic impact on the local hotel industry, despite the high priority 2002 objective of remodeling the annex for the purpose of housing. Nor is it clear as to whether the annex project is the same as the 2004 volunteer housing project, carrying an expenditure of \$51,000. We believe there would be no negative impact to the local hotel industry. The number of student volunteers is very low (fewer than five) and only occur during the summer months. It has proven nearly impossible to recruit student volunteers to the Refuge without being able to provide housing. These students, even if housed in Refuge housing, would still be purchasing food, gas, and other needed items in the local communities.

A reviewer was critical of the data included in the CCP. “Estimates and ‘factual’ information in the CCP may be inaccurate. The document is rife with different statistics for the same subject matter. The CCP lacks explanations as to how estimates were derived and as presented, calling into question the credibility of the economic impact assessments. Some numbers supplied are antiquated or averaged – more recent information should be available and factored into calculations. Furthermore, some numbers appear to be gross exaggerations. As a result, it is our fear that much of information results in conclusions which are misleading. All of this makes reading the CCP very difficult, confusing, conflicting and perplexing – entirely unacceptable for a federal agency with plenty of staff to research and cross-reference information.” It is difficult to respond to this comment without reference to specific numbers that the writer is questioning. The Economic Impact Assessment was an unbiased report prepared by Industrial Economics Inc., located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We have made every effort to use the most current data available in the preparation of the Refuge CCP, including this report.

Welfare value estimates (IEc study page 5-5) indicate that each Wisconsin citizen over the age of 18 is willing to contribute \$17 annually toward the existence of the NWR. An annual state parks sticker is approximately this much, but not anywhere near every resident over the age of 18 purchases a pass. Regardless, the 18-years and older principle was not applied to the refuge visitor numbers. Rather, the IEC model used 106,835 annual trips, then applying a societal value of \$21 lower-bound and \$31 upper-bound number to calculate the annual estimated values of \$2.2 million to \$3.3 million of societal contributions. Were we to pose in a survey of 18-year old constituents whether they would willingly

each contribute \$17 per years toward Eagle protection statewide, we predict that more than half of responders would decline to willingly contribute this suggested amount. Were a similar questioned posed to those that fish as to whether they willingly would contribute \$17 annually, we think the response would again be “no,” and if given the opportunity to state a willing contribution, the number would be even smaller, given the limited fishing opportunities on the refuge and our state’s unfortunate tax climate. Were a similar question posed to sportsmen in the hunt for waterfowl and migratory birds, giving them a range of \$14 to \$47 per trip of willing contribution for maintenance of the refuge, again, we believe the response would be similar. We do not contest the figures that big game sportsmen may well be willing to contribute somewhere between \$35 and \$45 per annual trip or that small game hunters may well be willing to contribute \$21 to \$55 per annual trip to the refuge (page 5-11), if nearer the lower end than the upper end of the range. Regardless, using national or statewide averages does not produce accurate data, given Juneau County’s current economic situation. What assumptions were made to calculate the number of visits by those fishing, hunting, photographing since no permits are issued for those activities? Permits are issued for trapping, timber removal, biological research and specimen collecting, commercial photography, and special access for disabled. Why was not this available data not supplied to IEc as it conducted its study? How many permits were issued in recent years in each for each of the permits noted? The CCP and associated study provides no data in this regard.

Assumptions and methodology provide the backbone of economic effects research. The Refuge provided the Industrial Economics economists the best available information at the time the study was prepared. The assumptions made by Industrial Economics relating to social welfare benefits were derived from studies conducted across the country. The above statement that “Welfare value estimates (IEc study page 5-5) indicate that each Wisconsin citizen over the age of 18 is willing to contribute \$17 annually towards the existence of the NWR” is taken out of context. Page 5.5 contains a discussion of research relating to activity day values. Page 5-15 contains a discussion of “Value of Endangered Species” and summarizes research conducted by Boyle and Bishop (1987) in the State of Wisconsin. This research estimated an annual willingness to pay of \$17 for Bald Eagle preservation by Wisconsin households.

As far as permits issued for special uses on the Refuge, we can provide the following:

Special access for the disabled: 2001 = 9; 2000 = 8; 1999 = 4; 1998 = 3.  
 Commercial photography: 2001 = 19; 200 = 1; 1999 = 0; 1998 = 0.  
 Specimen Collection: 2001 = 2; 2000 = 3; 1999 = 2; 1998 = 2.  
 Biological Research: 2001 = 10; 2000 = 0; 1999 = 2; 1998 = 7  
 Timber Removal: 2001 = 38; 2000 = 31; 1999 = 39; 1998 = 27  
 Trapping: 2001 = 6; 2000 = 6; 1999 = 6; 1998 = 6.

A reviewer questioned the relationship between Necedah NWR and the local units of government in relation to the comprehensive planning process, saying that the CCP did not specify the obligation of local units of government to devise their own local plans or mention the refuge’s intended participation in local planning processes. The Refuge has not been invited to participate in any local planning effort. The Refuge is however, involved with the State of Wisconsin in management planning for Meadow Valley and other areas through the Central Wisconsin Basin Partnership. If requested, the Refuge will provide support to the local units of government in their respective comprehensive planning process.

A reviewer offered sharp criticism of the Industrial Economic study prepared as part of the planning process, saying that the report is “fatally flawed” because inadequate information was provided. Data provided by the Refuge, such as visitation numbers, are unsupported, according to the reviewer. “Data supplied is not relevant, current, or credible, given the sources in combination with Juneau County’s

depressed economy and significant number of layoffs occurring in the last 8 months, the value of land being substantially higher than figures used in the model, the use of national data in the model, the use of antiquated 1994 data from BLS, BEA, OMB/SIC, and the use of a survey developed by FWS which uses national data (National Survey of Fishing Hunting Wildlife Associated Recreation - 1991)," according to the reviewer. The Service feels the report prepared by Industrial Economic was adequate for this application. Again, the Refuge (and Industrial Economics) used the best information available when completing the Economic Impact Assessment, CCP, and EA. The Economic Impact Assessment was completed in 1998, so some of the data used to generate the report is now outdated.

One reviewer stated that the economic impact and how it was calculated (what multipliers were used and why) needs to use current information and, rather than a regional approach, should provide information specific to Juneau County and Wood County. The reviewer also asked for clarification as to specific segments of the local economy that will benefit and more exact information as to negative impacts is also needed. The economic study was developed to better understand the economic contributions the Refuge makes to the local and regional economy. We feel Industrial Economics Inc. provided the Refuge with an adequate product for the intended purpose.

### **Public Use Comments and Questions**

Comments related to public use supporting Alternative 3 included:

- My family supports Alternative 3 because it allows for construction of a visitor center, restoration of two new wetlands complexes, restoration of savannas and grasslands that will benefit numerous species like the red-headed woodpecker; recovery of endangered species like the Karner blue butterfly and whooping crane, provision of resources to residents in the Yellow River to help them conserve wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, cerulean warblers, Karner blue butterflies, and red-shouldered hawks.
- I support Alternative 3 as it provides education opportunities for the kids of the future and the people of Wisconsin.
- We support Alternative 3 as it provides the greatest number of benefits to these people interested in recreational activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, and birding.
- I deer hunt on the Refuge but also enjoy walking through the savannas. I support Alternative 3 because it will increase the savannas while allowing for purchase of conservation easements from willing sellers.
- I have been taking students to the refuge for 17 years now; it is an essential part of my conservation class. I see dedicated refuge professionals both paid and volunteer do great things for conservation with nothing more than determination and some left over ex-Army engineer equipment. In the scope of things in this nation their budget is a pittance, but the rewards are unmeasurable.
- I support Alternative 3 because it insures that, like me, my children and grandchildren will see their first porcupine, trumpeter swan, and pileated woodpecker on the Refuge.

Several hunters felt that deer numbers were lower than they had been in the past and many hunters expressed a desire for more deer; although the same hunters sometimes wanted both more deer and bigger bucks. The Refuge is currently part of the State's Deer Management Unit 56 with harvest goals set by the Wisconsin DNR. While the Refuge manages open landscapes and forested areas for a variety of wildlife species, including white-tailed deer, it cannot reliably manipulate deer numbers unless it is managed as a separate management unit.



Many stakeholders felt the Refuge needed to be more active in promoting its programs and presence. More outreach, educational programs and better signs directing people to the Refuge were some suggestions. The Refuge would very much like to be more active in promoting its programs and presence. The CCP lists several objectives under Public Recreation and Education that address the need for clearer, up-to-date signs. Increased funding for staff in this area would greatly improve this program. Present management has greatly elevated this program area at the Refuge in recent years.

Many stakeholders expressed a desire for more fishing opportunities, more full-pool management, and fish stocking programs to enhance fishing success rates. As part of this CCP, the Refuge plans to work closely with state and Service fishery biologists to enhance fish stocks for recreational fishing and food for wildlife. The Refuge currently hosts an annual celebration of National Fishing Day, which usually includes fishing workshops, a fishing contest, and a demonstration of fishing techniques. The Refuge plans to enhance fishing opportunities at Harvey's Pond that will include an accessible fishing pier and a trail around the pond with benches for relaxation.

Several stakeholders expressed concern about Refuge savanna restoration efforts, namely, how that program might impact the quality of their goose hunting. This issue was relative to the Refuge's intent to restore savanna habitat near Suk Cerney Pool. Several meetings occurred with these stakeholders and the issue was resolved when the Refuge agreed to delay savanna restoration efforts in this area for at least 10 years.

One reviewer noted that the CCP described a need for \$57,000 of security-related expenses in 2002 and suggested that it indicated that Refuge staff expect trouble in the future. The reviewer said that if true partnerships were established with neighboring landowners, users/visitors, as well as with county and township officials, such improvements would not be deemed so immediate, nor would such a sizeable expenditure be required. Security-related expenditures are in no way a reflection of how the Refuge perceives relationships within the community. The \$57,000 referred to here is designated to replace and improve the outdated alarm system in the office buildings and provide new security systems for five buildings. We think that we owe it to taxpayers to protect Refuge property and maintain facilities that are secure. A vehicle break-in resulting in the loss of tools and supplies valued at over \$1,500 occurred on November 6, 2001. There were nearly 200 cases of violations against natural resources and property documented in the most recent Refuge Annual Law Enforcement Report submitted to our Washington Office.

A reviewer said that information as to how estimates used in the environmental impact study were derived would provide credibility as to the economic impact. The example cited concerned the CCPs estimate of 10,000 hunting trips in 1996 and 10,500 in 1999. The reviewer questioned what percentage of hunter/sportsmen are primarily within driving distance (e.g. local residents), or what percentage of hunters drove a significant distance, with an overnight stay in the area, thereby actually contributing to the local economy. Informal surveys of hunters by Refuge staff indicates that a large percentage of them come from outside the local area (mostly from the Madison and Milwaukee area). In 1998 the Refuge distributed approximately 5,000 "windshield" questionnaires to deer hunters on the Refuge. Hunters were asked which zip code did they reside in. The majority of the responses came from the Madison and Milwaukee area. It should be noted that the questionnaire was for informational purposes only.

A reviewer questioned the CCP's estimate of fishing trip numbers at 7,000 in 1996, saying that numbers for 1999 state half the 1996 amount of fishing visits – 3,500. The reviewer asks for an explanation of why a significant reduction occurred in only a 3-year period and how the number of visits was determined. The Refuge annually performs a vehicle survey during gun deer season to determine numbers of hunters. The Refuge also has collected data on numbers of out-of-state hunters in recent years. This lends a greater degree of accuracy to hunter number estimates than for fishing. Different survey methodology can account for the difference in Refuge fishing use numbers. The current system is thought to be more accurate than the previous system. The Economic Impact

Assessment notes “Caveats on the Activity Data.” Again, the Service used the best available information available to prepare the draft and final CCP and associated documents.

Another reviewer noted discrepancies in the estimated visitor numbers in different places within the CCP and questions the assertion that visitors result in economic benefit to the community. The reviewer offers the CCP’s estimate that 20,000 visitors came in 1999 to take photographs as an example. The 20,000 figure used in the document pertains just for photographers and refers to visits, not visitors. The majority of these visits were not of the K-12 age group. The sentence reads “almost 20,000 visits were made....” The remaining 96,000 visits were from wildlife observers. According to the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, in the year 2000 Juneau County contributed \$84 million dollars to Wisconsin’s multi-billion dollar tourism industry. We feel the Refuge contribution of \$2.3 million (as stated in the Economic Impact Assessment) is a conservative estimate.

A reviewer questioned the numbers used in describing the economic benefits of trapping on the Refuge. Trapping is rarely seen as an economic activity anymore, but rather a recreational activity that has wildlife management benefits. We believe the \$1,000 figure stated in the CCP is adequate for the intended purpose. Some full-time trappers have reported taking in excess of 100 muskrats daily.

An individual questioned whether Refuge facilities meet Service standards and asked for clarification on improvements proposed in the CCP. The reviewer questioned how the Refuge is going to address special needs and how the type and location of accommodations for disabled people were determined. The Refuge currently has one universally accessible fishing pier and one universally accessible waterfowl blind. We also provide vehicle gate access for class A/B deer hunters. Our office meets all accessibility requirements. We are planning one additional fishing pier at Harvey’s Pond for the disabled. The pier has been funded and installed at a cost of \$15K. Trail work, signing, and parking is yet to be developed with the remaining projected budget.

The CCP states that a press release will be issued annually prior to deer season regarding coyote closure, and a reviewer stated that prior to deer season neither the local radio station nor the local newspaper had received a public service announcement. An article was published the opening day of gun deer season (2001). Please understand, the Refuge has no control over when (or if) the local media chooses to print an item received from the Refuge. Also, objectives and strategies in the CCP are not necessarily effective until the CCP is approved, and it had not been approved in 2001.

A reviewer questioned the location of future parking areas identified in the CCP and who would benefit from the parking areas. The parking area will accommodate mostly deer hunters using the Refuge as well as small game hunters. However, berry pickers and birders will also benefit.

A reviewer asked whether determining appropriate deer hunter use/day numbers means that the Refuge intends to limit hunter opportunities in the future. It might, if hunting conditions pose a safety issue. Twenty percent of the Refuge is open to all small game, waterfowl, and deer hunting (except October Zone T, if applicable). The remaining 80 percent, except for a 2-square-mile safety zone around the office complex, is open for gun deer, late archery deer, and late small game. The entire Refuge is open for spring turkey season, except for a 2-mile safety zone. Refuge hunting opportunities have increased in recent years, both for big game and small game hunting.

An individual questions the IEC study’s statement on deer, turkey, grouse populations related to large block timber cuttings and asks for specific numbers on the amount of acreage now in timber that would no longer exist. The CCP states that by 2017, the Refuge will maintain 10,400 acres of forest land (all types); the Refuge currently has roughly 16,500 acres. We do not agree with Industrial Economics statement that deer and turkey populations, as well as hunter/visitor numbers, will decrease as a result of forest land being converted to open landscapes (i.e., savanna).

A reviewer questions a statement in the CCP regarding abandonment of some township roads, subject to the township's approval, and whether this would mean less access for physically disabled people, local residents and emergency vehicles. The only roads that may be abandoned in the foreseeable future are a couple of dead end spurs, which end at a Refuge gate or wetland site.

### **Yellow River Focus Area**

The Service received several comments supporting conservation work within the Yellow River Focus Area. Comments included:

- I support Alternative 3 because it allows for full utilization of the Refuge and Yellow River. Also, Alternative 3 allows the Refuge to secure lands from willing sellers, which is needed, as the Yellow River is one of the few remaining high-quality northern floodplain forests in Wisconsin.
- I support Alternative 3 because it insures protection of the environment, which should be our main goal with rapid population growth.
- I support Alternative 3 because it insures protection of the Yellow River and Refuge for future generations.
- We support Alternative 3 because it demonstrates the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's commitment to cooperatively work with private and state landowners to maximize conservation objectives while also helping to meet quality of life and economic needs of surrounding communities.
- We support Alternative 3 because it would increase the opportunities to work with private landowners to pursue voluntary conservation practices.
- I am a landowner in the Yellow River Focus Area and along with my husband, support Alternative 3 because the resources Refuge staff have provided us.
- We support Alternative 3 because it allows the Refuge to continue and expand work in the Yellow River Focus Area.
- I support Alternative 3 because it helps surrounding landowners protect the area.
- I support Alternative 3 because it best serves the needs of local wildlife and preservation and health of the Yellow River.
- We support Alternative 3 because it would increase the opportunities to work with private landowners to pursue voluntary conservation practices.
- I support Alternative 3 because I own land in the Yellow River Focus Area and this alternative reaffirms landowner rights. This alternative gives us the opportunity to work with whichever government agency we chose to enhance our land which is our right.
- We support Alternative 3 because it proposes a unique private/public voluntary partnership program to work with landowners along the biologically critical Yellow River.
- I support Alternative 3 because it allows the Refuge to acquire additional properties from willing sellers, which will enhance the ability of the Refuge to accomplish its mission. I also believe this will benefit the remaining privately held property in central Wisconsin.
- I am aware of the continuing work with private landowners and the state to protect and restore Yellow River habitats. This, together with the savanna restoration, in my opinion, are the appropriate focal points for the immediate future.
- We support Alternative 3 because the approach that is being taken appears to be an excellent project that will enhance the Yellow River Focus Area, the Refuge and surrounding community.
- I support Alternative 3 because it focuses attention on the Yellow River, which deserves as much protection as a large river like the Mississippi.

- I support Alternative 3 because I believe that voluntary, community-based land conservation, including purchase of conservation easements, holds the greatest potential for both achieving conservation objectives and preserving the rights of property owners.
- I support Alternative 3 because it insures long-term protection of trumpeter swans and fosters important relationships with local land owners in the Yellow River watershed, and such relationships are critical from landscape perspective to providing important breeding habitat for neotropical migratory birds.
- We support Alternative 3 because it supports protection of significant resources found within the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge and the Yellow River Focus Area.
- I support Alternative 3 because it provides for maintenance and restoration of wetlands and acquisition of conservation easements to create a local network of wildlife habitat.
- My strong personal opinion is that the overall good afforded to the citizens of our community by having professionally managed/preserved Yellow River Basin far outweighs the potential loss of tax revenue to the townships and the county. The Yellow River and adjoining forest has an intangible value, not the least of which is its ability to enhance the quality of our lives within Juneau County.
- I support Alternative 3, which would permit interaction with private landowners in the Yellow River in a voluntary manner.
- I support Alternative 3 because I am a landowner in the Yellow River Focus Area and I appreciate the Refuge helping me to clear brush from my property which I can't do because I am too old, as is my equipment.
- I support Alternative 3 because I am a landowner in the Yellow River and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service restored my prairie at no expense when I didn't have the means myself.
- I am especially excited about the proposed assistance to be provided to private landowners in the Yellow River Focus Area. We need to expand efforts like this to gain more conservation initiatives through voluntary efforts on privately owned lands. As Aldo Leopold pointed out over 50 years ago, we cannot expect government to set aside enough lands to meet future needs. Efforts like this, to work with willing landowners to benefit habitat on private lands is the key to future conservation success.
- I support Alternative 3 because without it, much of the habitat within and adjoining the Refuge will be lost forever.
- We strongly support your efforts to protect land along the Yellow River Focus Area through conservation easements. We also encourage you to boost your public outreach and education efforts to help explain the advantages of such efforts.
- I believe you're on the right track. Protection of small rivers is, in my opinion, just as important as protecting the Mississippi. In fact, I don't think it's possible to protect the Mississippi without guarding tributaries such as the Yellow.

A reviewer asked for a definition of the term "focus area." The Yellow River Focus Area is just a term the Refuge uses to describe a 21,953-acre area that encompasses a portion of the lower Yellow River that runs parallel to the Refuge to its east. It is an area where the Refuge would like to work with landowners through cooperative agreements, easements, and acquisition to conserve and restore some of the wildlife and habitat associated with the area, such as neotropical song birds that rely on the bottomland forests. It is not a Refuge boundary and is not an official term. "Study area", "area of interest", and "area of opportunity" are other terms often used to describe similar areas of interest to the Service.

A reviewer questioned where would the Service get the money for land acquisition in the Yellow River Focus Area. Typically, money to acquire land for national wildlife refuges comes from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The Land and Water Conservation Fund derives its money primarily from

the sale of products on federal land, such as offshore oil and gas leases. However, people often donate land to the Service, or money could come in the form of a grant.

Another comment asked whether the Yellow River Focus Area is associated in any way with the Nature Conservancy. The Nature Conservancy has not been involved in any way with the Yellow River Focus Area project.

A reviewer questioned whether he or she would ever be forced to sell land if it were within the Yellow River Focus Area. All habitat conservation, restoration, and management performed in the Yellow River Focus Area by Necedah NWR would be on a voluntary basis. No one will ever be forced to sell their land. From its initiation, landowner participation in all conservation opportunities has been, and always will be, completely voluntary. If a landowner decides to sell land, he or she may sell to whomever they choose.

Another reviewer questioned whether land owned in or around The Yellow River Focus Area or in an area that the Service says has high natural resource value would ever be condemned. Service policy is to acquire land only from willing sellers. While the Service has authority to condemn property, it doesn't use it except to clear title or conserve critically imperiled endangered species (which are rare). The latter is not the case in with this project. Condemnation was used in less than 1 percent of all transactions. In fact, we were directed by Congress to use it in one of the few cases on record. Landowners within the Yellow River Area retain all of their rights, privileges, and responsibilities of private land ownership regardless whether it is a Service focus area or not. The presence of Refuge lands in the Yellow River Focus Area Basin would not afford the Service any authority to impose restrictions on any private lands. Service control of access, land use practices, water management practices, hunting, fishing, and general use is limited only to those lands in which the Service purchases an appropriate realty interest.

An individual questioned whether his or her rights as a property owner would be infringed upon as a result of being in a the Yellow River Focus Area. Private landowners retain all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of private land ownership, including the right of access, control of trespass, and right to sell or not to sell.

The Service was urged to increase the amount of fee-title acquisitions from willing sellers in the Yellow River Focus Area beyond 250 acres per year as this unnecessarily constrains the ability to purchase large parcels should become available. On the other hand, some stakeholders would like to see the Refuge decrease the proposed fee-title acquisition to zero acres. In an effort to strike a balance among all interested parties, the Refuge decided on 250 acres. In the Environmental Assessment (section 4.6.3.2) it states: "In reality, this figure could be more or less given the uncertainty of future funding scenarios and the presence of willing sellers." The Service supports the right of every property owner to make his or her own decision about land acquisition.

An individual encouraged the Refuge to work with private land owners to conserve large, forested stands in the Yellow River Focus Area to benefit Red-shouldered Hawks. The Refuge encourages landowners to conserve intact bottomland hardwood forest with the exception of areas that hold open-canopy species of concern such as the Golden-winged and Blue-winged Warblers and the eastern massasauga.

A reviewer questioned whether or not it is a conflict of interest if Service employees own land within a Service Focus Area, and whether or not he or she would have inside information regarding the availability of grants or programs and whether he or she would receive a better price if they sold land. It is not a conflict of interest for a Service employee to own land in an area proposed for habitat conservation, restoration, and management by the Service. While he or she may be better informed about the existence of the Service's private lands programs, the individual would not have any inside

information on grants or programs that are available to landowners, nor would he or she have any better access to such programs. If the individual chooses to sell land to the Service, he or she would not get a higher dollar value for his property. The Service is legally mandated to pay fair market value for any land acquired, which means that we cannot pay anyone less than fair market value and we cannot pay anyone more than fair market value.

Some people are concerned that the presence of Service employees and researchers with other agencies might increase their legal liability. The Service is not aware of any circumstance where insurance premiums were ever increased as a result of private land being associated with a Service focus area or private land being located adjacent to a national wildlife refuge.

One reviewer questioned a reference to the Yellow River Focus Area containing 21,952 acres, noting that the number supplied to IEC (the Massachusetts firm which conducted the 1998 study) was 18,100 acres and a total of acreage of the Yellow River Focus Area using map numbers is 21,550, a differential of 402 acres. The reviewer questioned how the same document can contain three different numbers for the same focus area. The correct number is 21,953 acres. Industrial Economics was given the 18,100 acre figure in 1996 before any planning began. Acreage figures were initially derived using Plat Book Maps and later using Geographic Information System (GIS) data supplied through the Wisconsin GAP project. Similarly, no surveys on individual tracts has been done to verify acreage.

A reviewer took issue with the use of a \$1,000 per acre estimate and a weighted assessment ratio used in estimating appraisals as part the discussion of tax implications and noted increases in assessed values in various locations in Wisconsin. The analysis was prepared to illustrate potential tax implications. The \$1,000 per acre figure used in the analysis was out of convenience. We feel it is a fair estimate for the diverse lands (and associated land values) for the Yellow River Area.

An individual disagreed with the Environmental Assessment's analysis of the impact of land acquisition by the Refuge on county tax revenues. The EA described land acquisition as having a neutral effect on tax revenues, and the writer stated that: "To suggest that impact of federal land acquisition is revenue neutral is a gross misrepresentation. In fact, units of government reliant on their tax base would almost certainly experience a negative impact if the federal government purchased additional land in the YRFA. The fact that the CCP attempts to lead readers to believe that would not be the case is inexcusable." In the fall of 2001, an analysis was conducted by the Wisconsin Department of Revenue to estimate tax impacts associated with the Yellow River Focus Area project. According to that study, acquisition of land by the Service in the Yellow River Focus Area would result in a very minimal increase in property taxes for individual landowners in some local municipalities. In others, taxes would actually decrease as a result of Service acquisition. Details of this analysis will be provided in the final Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

In another comment, a reviewer differed with population projections and how they were reported in the CCP and EA. The reviewer also disagreed with housing trends reported in the plan. In the years 1998-2000, the Township of Necedah approved 40, 42, and 47 new sanitary system permits. These numbers were far higher than any of the other townships in the county.

An individual disagreed with the Service's characterization of land within the Yellow River Focus Area as being unprotected from future development, and said that the plan failed to note the number of properties subject to zoning, ordinance and conservation program protections. The writer estimated that 31 percent of the 21,550-acre focus area, or 6,680 acres, could be called "at risk," and noted that that number is higher than the Service's target goal of projected conserved YRFA acreage of 3,750 acres and still leaves considerable acreage at risk. The 3,750 acre per year estimate is based on a potential future funding scenario accommodating up to 250 acres per year (best guess estimate). Further, there are other areas in the Yellow River Focus Area currently under varying degrees of conservation. While the Service applauds private efforts to conserve land, we recognize that some conservation programs do not afford permanent conservation of habitat.

An individual asked for information on how the public and landowners might have input into the review and revision of Refuge step-down plans, and expressed interest in planning concerning the eastern massasauga rattlesnake. The writer is concerned that landowners who killed a massasauga to protect themselves or family members would be breaking federal law. We are prohibited from establishing committees to gather input on step-down management plans by the Federal Advisory Committee Act. While we cannot put you on a committee to develop Refuge management plans, we do invite you to share your concerns with Refuge staff. Regarding your question on eastern massasauga rattlesnakes and laws protecting them, the species is protected by state law presently, not federal law. The eastern massasauga is listed as an endangered species by the State of Wisconsin. If the massasauga were to become federally-listed, it would become one of the trust species for which the Service has management responsibilities. We would also like to point out that occurrence of the species is very rare. One sub-adult eastern massasauga rattlesnake was found on Refuge land east of Highway 80 in 1993, and they are found in very low numbers within the Yellow River Focus Area.

A reviewer questioned how the FWS intends to address tamarack tannic acid discoloration of the Yellow River and associated pH problems in the groundwater. The writer also questions how the Service would address invasive species control without help from the WCC. The Service is not aware of pH data being available for the Yellow River, so we are unable to assess whether there might be impacts for fish populations. The WCC, which assists the Refuge with invasive species control (i.e. leafy spurge) for less than one day a year, is not a major part of the Refuge's invasive species control program. Refuge staff will be able to make up for the loss of WCC assistance.

Another person questioned several statements in the CCP and EA: In reference to statements regarding technical assistance provided and additional land being conserved, what management techniques have been implemented that were not previously available, or what changes have private landowners made that will enhance wildlife habitat; in reference to a statement in the CCP and EA to the effect that conservation easements and acquisition can begin following CCP approval, does that mean that publication of the document will commence the start of the acquisition process regardless of public input; which of the Refuge's goals and objectives can be achieved without acquiring land; and can objectives to increase breeding pairs of waterfowl be achieved without acquiring land in the Yellow River Focus Area.

References in the CCP to technical assistance provided to private landowners illustrates our desire to work with private landowners and our belief that private landowners can make a valuable contribution to conservation. Their efforts will not contribute to Refuge visitor opportunities. Technical assistance helps landowners provide fish and wildlife species with the habitat they need to feed, breed and raise young. This may involve reducing chemical runoff into water, setting land aside from agricultural uses, planting native grass species, installing nesting boxes or a whole host of other techniques. Regarding the question on what publication of the CCP means to land acquisition, completion of the CCP does mean that the Service is adopting the preferred alternative. Adopting the CCP in no way launches the acquisition process, however. It means that if a landowner is interested in pursuing a conservation easement or selling land, the Refuge is authorized to talk to that landowner. Approval of the CCP in no way guarantees that the Refuge will have the funds to buy land even if there are willing landowners. Individuals who do not want to sell land to or work with the Service are not obliged to, and their use of their land will not be affected by the Refuge. We have heard both positive and negative comments about acquiring land in the Yellow River Focus Area, and we have considered all of the comments. The Refuge's goals and objectives were written for the Refuge, not the Yellow River Focus Area. With the exception of Objective 4.2, which relates to conservation within the Yellow River Focus Area, all of the objectives can be achieved without acquisition in the Yellow River Focus Area. Certainly the waterfowl breeding pairs objectives concern the Refuge, not the Yellow River Focus Area.

A reviewer questioned whether the Refuge would qualify for Wilderness designation if acquisition within the Yellow River Focus Area occurred. Even if land were acquired from willing sellers in the

Yellow River Focus Area, Refuge ownership would not contain 5,000 contiguous roadless acres and therefore would not qualify for Wilderness designation.

An individual criticized the CCP's lack of detail on step-down management plans, and wildlife-dependent recreational activities and questions how measures or types of actions proposed would result in improved water quality, improved habitat, greater user satisfaction, etc. Our intent has been to be as specific as possible in the CCP. However, the Yellow River Focus Area involves land we do not own, which makes it impossible to provide detailed information on wildlife-dependent recreation, habitat improvement or water quality. To provide this level of detail, we would need to know which land would be purchased, how much land would be purchased, and when it would be purchased. The Service is committed to working with willing sellers only when we acquire land for the National Wildlife Refuge System, which means that we buy land only when the seller is ready to sell. We cannot predict where land might be purchased or how much land might be purchased. In general, we believe that water quality will benefit in the long-term by habitat conservation. Any land acquired by the Service will be evaluated for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and environmental interpretation.